

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

Summary

A variety of figures, all of them Tahitian, sprawl across the wide frame of the painting, each engaged in a particular and significant act. In the center of the image, a man wearing a simple loincloth picks an apple from the top edge of the image. To his right, a nude person examines his or her underarm, two clothed women in the background walk together with their arms around one another, three women sit together around a babe, and a dog looks inward from the exterior of the right edge.

On the left of the apple-picking man, two white kittens play with one another next to a clothed young girl who eats an apple. Behind her lies a goat. In the far background stands a blue religious statue, to the right of which stands a lone fully clothed woman. At the far left of the painting, a dark-skinned unclothed old woman sits with her head in her hands, next to a seated, nubile young woman with firm, full, bare breasts. A white bird sits to their immediate left.

Commentary

Painted in 1897 and 1898, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" addresses Paul Gauguin's struggle with the meaning of existence. In 1891, Gauguin emigrated to Tahiti in search of a society more unspoiled than his native France. This piece, part of a series of introspective paintings inspired by his new country, was considered by Gauguin "to be his masterpiece and the summation of his ideas" (see Boston Museum of Fine Arts web site).

The piece should be viewed as a text from right to left--a suggestion imparted by the artist's own letters--with the various figures representative of questions relating to human existence. In this light, the babe at the far right signifies newborn life. The figure of questionable sex whose back is turned to the viewer and who appears to inspect his or her underarm could be understood as the beginning of an individual's realization of gender. The apple-picking male and the girl to his left who sits eating an apple reenact the fable of Adam and Eve and the quest for knowledge.

The old lady at the far left of the frame sits on the verge of death, unclothed as a parallel perhaps to the babe on the painting's far right. As one examines the painting, the questions that make up the artwork's title--"Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?"--invite the viewer to contemplate the meaning of life with regard to the symbols Gauguin has left for us.

Evocative life-cycle juxtapositions: Titian's Three Ages of Man, Cole's Voyage of life: Childhood/Youth /Manhood/Old Age, and Munch's The Dance of Life (see this database for annotations).

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